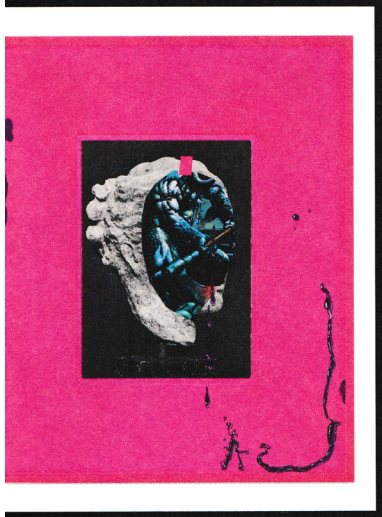




Aaron Curry; at left, his *Untitled collage*, 2013



Artists' personalities don't always match up to the personalities of their work, and that was never more true than with Aaron Curry, a Los Angeles-based sculptor and painter who is in the spotlight of late.

His sculptures, which took over the plaza at New York's Lincoln Center last fall in a monumental outdoor exhibition called "Melt to Earth," are big and brightly colored—they practically grab you by the lapels to look at them. And Curry is now taking Europe by storm with two June shows on the continent—one in London, one in Bordeaux—that demonstrate his evolving artistry.

The 41-year-old Curry, however, is heavily bearded and intensely soft-spoken, several leagues away from the self-promoting artist type who has come to define the current gallery scene. "I don't do the social things," says Curry sheepishly. "I have a studio at home, and I'm there all day, every day—but I do have lunch with my wife."

What's important is what he does in that studio. For "Melt to Earth," he created pieces that were like the love children of Alexander Calder (bold geometric shapes and wide curves with thin metal edges) and someone from the Kenny Scharf or Keith Haring generation (neon hues, cartoonish elements bursting through).

With Curry, that synthesis isn't self-conscious. "It's a mash-up, but it reflects the time and place of my growing up," he says of his childhood in San Antonio. "There wasn't any 'art.' I didn't grow up around the high-low debate. I knew about art through comics and album covers."

Curry attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which was quite a leap for him at the time. "I really got into Rauschenberg," he says, "and then that led me through a tour of the high-art tradition—Picasso, Matisse's cutouts, those Dubuffet outdoor sculptures in black and white." All of which, not incidentally, you can see subtly influencing his work.

While Curry says the Lincoln Center exhibition was "certainly my biggest public show to date," he's now turning around and upending our perception of him as a sculptor by going back to his first love: painting.

At the London branch of Michael Werner Gallery, he's showing works on canvas through early August, and at the prestigious CAPC Museum of Contemporary Art in Bordeaux, a mid-career retrospective of Curry's work began in May with a large emphasis on paintings. "I started out as a painter in school," says Curry, reflecting on his early experiments hooking up paintings to an amplifier to combine that medium with his love of music.

But Curry's canvases don't lack for visual pizzazz. The mottled, morphing, sometimes vaguely grotesque forms at Michael Werner

demonstrate one of his primary influences: the Chicago Imagists of the 1970s and '80s, whose work he experienced when studying in that city. "I'm a big fan of the Imagists," he says, referring to painters like Jim Nutt and Ed Paschke, who took cartoon imagery and traveled to a darker place with it.

Curry stopped painting about 10 years ago to focus on sculpture, but a year ago took it up again. "I didn't intend to show them, so there was no pressure," he says. "But they developed, and now it's time." He doesn't work with assistants, so it was just Curry in the studio, making progress in the slow, steady way for which he's becoming known. "I don't make drastic changes—I just keep moving forward."

Painterly Awakening

After nearly a decade, Aaron Curry returns to his first love, the canvas.

BY TED LOOS PORTRAIT BY SARAH TRIGG